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## **Developing immersive simulations: The potential of theatre in teaching and learning in political studies**

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# **Developing immersive simulations: The potential of theatre in teaching and learning in political studies**

*ABSTRACT: Innovative teachers of political science have frequently moved beyond the confines of conventional teaching formats in order to better engage students with the demands of the discipline. In particular, the use of simulations has been proposed as an alternative to passive, lecture-based technique, and a growing literature examines their value and efficacy. In this article we contribute to this literature by outlining the development of a simulation which draws upon the principles of immersive theatre in an attempt to maximise participation while encouraging students to think critically about political concepts and ideas.*

## **Introduction**

The literature on teaching and learning in political science articulates a concern over the variety and effectiveness of 'conventional' means of teaching politics students (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008). Increasingly, researchers have highlighted problems related to the complexity of political ideas and their application, their sometimes abstract nature, and the need for the necessary knowledge of political systems to be able to fully appreciate the issues at hand (Payerhin, 2003). At the same time, students' diverse learning preferences have meant that teaching methods rooted in well-established class formats can fail to properly satisfy the needs and expectations of a significant number of students (Damron and Mott 2005; Fox and Ronkowski 1997; Loggins 2009).

In this context, the use of simulations has been proposed as an effective alternative. Simulations – simplified representations of an external reality used to promote cooperative or problem-based learning – have been found to more effectively engage students, develop cognitive skills, and foster a sense of ownership, than more passive approaches to learning (Dorn 1989). Simulations can be useful because they require a degree of student participation that is not necessary in more passive learning techniques, and bring theoretical insights directly to bear on practical examples.

In this article, we aim to extend this discussion and further, prompting thought on innovation in teaching political science through an exploration of the ways insights drawn from immersive theatre may be used to communicate political ideas in the classroom. By discussing our experiences of the development of an undergraduate simulation which used the principles of immersive theatre, we demonstrate its potential to develop approaches to teaching which engage students strongly in theoretical problems, while encouraging negotiation, communication and teamwork skills. Our experiences suggest that close attention to the development and planning of simulations, as well as a structured period of reflection after the session, is particularly important in ensuring their success.

The article begins with a brief account of the value of simulations as teaching and learning tools in political science. It then outlines the development of our simulation as part of a collaboration with Coney, a theatre company specialising in immersive performances. Following this, the piece sketches the translation of the simulation to the classroom, outlining the main learning points at each stage, in the context of the existing literature. The article highlights the value of reaching beyond the boundaries of political science when developing teaching practice, and identifies the main benefits of the collaboration. We also include two Appendices, one providing further information on background and development, and a second providing further details on the simulation itself, to aid replication.

## **Using simulations in political science**

Innovative teachers of political science have frequently moved beyond the confines of conventional

classroom formats in order to engage audiences better with the demands of the subject (Moran 2013; Schaap 2005; Woodcock 2006;). For instance, Michael Laver famously used games as a teaching tool to demonstrate the complexity of political interactions. His book *Playing Politics* (1979) puts across a compelling case for the potential of developing forms of teaching which make political concepts accessible to a wide audience. Similar concerns motivate Schaap's (2005) use of role play in political theory classes, Smith's (2012) game used to illustrate Duverger's Law to undergraduates, and even Woodcock's (2006) use of *The Simpsons* as a means of shaping classroom discussions on political theory and democracy.

What is common to each of these approaches is the idea that learning need not be a passive activity, but an active encounter where students have agency over their engagement with the topic to the benefit of their learning experience. Viewing teaching in this way can create an environment where the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student is not defined according to the norms of the conventional university classroom, a significant point given that the ability to vary the form and method of instruction given to political science students is central to recent thought on teaching practice. There is a widespread recognition that students have a range of different learning preferences, not all of which can be met through traditional approaches to teaching (Brock and Cameron 1999; Fox and Ronkowski 1997).

The emergence of simulations as a classroom tool to help alleviate these kinds of problems is well-documented (for useful accounts, see Asal and Blake 2006; Frederking 2005; Smith and Boyer 2008). The value of exposing students of political science to these kinds of activity is that they are required to work together in order to solve the problems presented to them, and good simulations will clarify the theoretical grounding of the activity. As Damron and Mott (2005: 368) suggest, 'the task in all political science classes is to teach students to think critically about key concepts and ideas rather than just play the game of demonstrating that they can define those concepts and ideas'. Cooperative and problem-solving classroom activities can encourage students to critically analyse and apply political concepts rather than just demonstrate their comprehension of those concepts. The challenge, of course, is to devise simulations that are appropriate to the class and the audience, and to employ them in a way that maximises student engagement while rigorously exploring theory.

Our experience in the classroom underlines these points. We were concerned that our largely theoretical undergraduate module on democratic ideas would lose traction when students came to examine contemporary political problems in class. In response, we developed a simulation which directly addressed the themes covered in the module, but encouraged our students to approach them in ways they determined themselves.

### **Developing the simulation**

Our approach to developing the simulation had a unique background. During the early stages we worked closely with Coney, a theatre company specialising in immersive techniques (see Appendix 1 for more information on the project). Immersive theatre is distinguished by its treatment of the audience, and has been described as a 'theatre of experience' (Groot Nibbelink 2012: 416). Whereas conventional theatrical performances feature an actor performing a part on stage, immersive theatre brings the audience centre-stage and makes witnesses, actors and directors of them, blurring the distinction between theatre and life. Creating immersive performances involves giving the audience control over the choices that they make in the performance, and depending on the decisions made, their interaction with one another, and their engagement with the narrative structure of the piece, any two performances can look very different indeed (Nield 2005).

Most practitioners of immersive theatre are explicit about their aims to challenge the bias and prejudice of their audience. For some, this is a consciously political act; as Bray and Chappell

(2005: 92) note, '[t]heater...is a form of communication that discloses aspects of political reality that would not be understood without it'. To achieve this, performances adapt to make use of different spaces, and frequently move out of theatres and galleries to take place in everyday or 'found' spaces (White 2012). Significantly, the interplay between space, plot, and the background information provided during performances (in the form of text, props or conversations with actors) is not comprehensive and the 'imaginative filling-in of gaps' by the audience is important in understanding the degree of control they have over the performance (White 2012: 231).

Our work with Coney originally focused on developing a theatrical performance which dealt with political theory, and whose guiding principles were adapted in our classroom simulation. The performance, 'Early Days of a Better Nation', placed the audience as the nascent government of a fictional country emerging from the ruins of a civil war. Participants are divided into four 'regions' and were given information relating to the political state of their region through secret letters, 'covert' radio broadcasts and conversations with professional actors. From this starting point, the audience is tasked with rebuilding the political system from scratch, and are presented with a series of collective action problems that require both cooperation and compromise to be successfully resolved. The piece was unique in its aim to introduce audience members to political ideas through direct participation in discussion, negotiation and problem-solving.

As part of the development, we contributed to four 'scratch' performances held by Coney, three of which were open to members of the public, and one to university students and staff. Each of these performances concluded with a debrief which focused on putting the audience's experiences of the performance into the context of its theoretical underpinnings. These sessions proved invaluable; it quickly became clear that a period of reflection and discussion enabled participants to consider their individual experiences of the performance in a far more critical manner than would have otherwise been the case.

### **Bringing theatre to the classroom**

Our work with Coney raised two major points that affected our thoughts on the ways in which simulations can be run, particularly in large groups. First, simulations can benefit not only from a focus on the kinds of tasks allocated to participants but from a serious consideration of the story arc through which students are guided during the class. A strength of the Coney performances was the use of dramatic devices to engage the audience in complex ideas, reinforcing the theoretical themes encountered during the performance, and we aimed to harness this in a classroom setting. Second, the freedom of audience members to decide for themselves the direction of the performance was important. The immersive approach provided a framework within which audience members could encounter numerous theoretical questions without dictating the order of the piece, or the outcome. As teachers, we found this fascinating. Too often, course curricula are decided and rigidly imposed by instructors, with little thought for the differing ways in which students might encounter the problems set. In contrast, these techniques allowed a degree of student ownership that is rarely possible in the classroom.

We worked with Coney in translating the principles of the 'Early Days' performance to the classroom, and encountered a number of distinct challenges. The class in question was an undergraduate module focused on democratic theory. A large class (attendance most weeks was 60-70 students), running a successful simulation would require an approach that relied on participation both across the class as a whole, as well as in smaller groups. This matched the experience of the theatrical performances, where audiences were approximately the same size. The learning outcomes for the topic addressed by the simulation were to introduce students to contemporary issues in representative democracy through an examination of democratic theory, as well as developing their communication skills and group working.

From the outset, it was clear we were producing a class that was distinct from conventional simulations. In addition to providing a basic structure for the session, adapting the theatrical performances allowed elements of emplotment to be introduced into the simulation. The narrative structure of the 'Early Days' performance underpinned the simulation; conversations with the instructor took the place of the encounters with professional actors in the performances, and elements of staging were introduced to the session in order to enhance student engagement with the session. Beyond this, we worked with Coney to create an environment where students addressed the topic at hand but felt free to adapt and imagine their roles. This directly used an important element of immersive practice in the simulation.

We felt that devising a simulation which followed the insights of immersive theatre in this way could improve the classroom experience in three ways: (1) by moving the class away from the norms of standard teaching formats by allowing the students considerable leeway over the structure and direction of the session, (2) by utilising the classroom setting in new ways, through the re-ordering of the space and introducing elements of staging, and (3) by engaging students in theoretical questions by addressing them through the narrative structure of the simulation.

As previous literature on simulations have indicated, implementing this kind of approach takes careful consideration and planning, and a clear focus on the various stages involved in the planning and execution of the class is important (Asal and Blake 2006). Students need to be engaged at each stage in the process, and thought needs to be put into the learning objectives of the course, the kinds of students involved and the roles they are required to play, the organisation of the session and, importantly, the use of debriefs to facilitate critical consideration of the issues built into the simulation (Loggins 2005). Asal and Blake (2006) develop an account of this process which is sympathetic to the demands of political science and draws on previous literature, separating the management of a simulation into three discrete stages; Preparation, Interaction and Debriefing. We adapted the principles of this work in the development and delivery of the session.

## **Rebuilding Democratia: A classroom simulation**

### *Preparation*

Our simulation took place mid-way through the term, once the introductory elements of the course had been covered, and focused on representation, exploring some of the fundamentals of democratic theory in the area. One week before the simulation, students were given an introductory lecture covering the main themes that the exercise would explore. At the end of the lecture, the class were provided with a reading list to be covered in advance of the simulation, and a set of questions to consider when working through the literature. Students were given limited information on the session itself, beyond an instruction that they were going to take part in a class-wide simulation.

### *Interaction*

On arriving at class, students were divided into small groups of approximately eight, representing the regions of a fictional nation (Democratia), and provided with information on the session. This took the form of a booklet detailing the social and economic history of their particular region, and the nation as a whole, including the recent descent into civil conflict, which had been abandoned in stalemate. Students were also presented with a written constitution that established a framework for the session. Maps of Democratia were projected on the walls of the classroom, and the room divided into distinct 'regions'. At the front of the room, chairs were arranged to mimic a parliamentary assembly.

Each region was asked to elect a single representative to a 'national assembly'. Representatives were elected for terms of ten minutes, during which they would deliberate and pass legislation before being sent back to their regions for a mandatory election. The programme of legislation was designed beforehand, and explicitly focused on the themes dealt with in the lecture and subsequent reading. Importantly, although the format for the session was provided and facilitated by an instructor (acting as the 'Speaker' of the assembly), students were free to change the structure of the simulation, as long as they abided by a few basic rules (through, for example, proposing new legislation, or forcing a constitutional amendment).

Once the ground rules of the session had been covered, students were immediately tasked with carrying out an election. Coney's theatrical performances had highlighted the importance of momentum with sessions involving large numbers of participants, and the brief periods between elections, together with the prepared programme of work, ensured that participation was maintained from the outset. Any questions students had over the rules of the session were addressed to the instructor, who responded in their role as 'Speaker'.

### *Debriefing and reflection*

The last half hour of the session was dedicated to a structured debrief of the simulation. Students, in their 'regions', were asked to prepare a brief account of the main lessons they had learned from the simulation, focusing particularly on the links with the theoretical content of the literature they had covered in the previous week. For the few days after the session, this activity continued. The instructor posted their own reflections on the course Virtual Learning Environment, and students were encouraged to respond, either in the same manner, or in a series of follow-up sessions at the end of the course.

### **Student responses**

The student responses to the simulation were overwhelmingly positive - when asked to score the session on a five-point scale the class overall rated it 4.97. During the debrief and follow-up sessions the participants contrasted the session favourably with their previous classroom experiences and highlighted in particular the benefits of exploring political ideas in this way. The debriefing sessions suggested students appreciated the complexity of representation through the simulation, and emphasised that their understanding of the topic was enhanced as a result.

What is particularly interesting, however, is the value students found in the immersive techniques; the debrief sessions and course evaluations all strongly suggested that students found the ability to act out the theories they encountered helpful, and that the nature of the simulation benefited student engagement. Indeed, many of the participants reported that they felt that more theatrical elements might be introduced into the session, as these made the simulation enjoyable and engaging. This raises the prospect of moving the simulation out of the classroom, and perhaps holding sessions in government buildings or debate chambers. Additionally, the novel format of the class encouraged participation, with one student observing, 'I often find seminars intimidating, so it was good to do a group activity as getting to know my classmates helps develop my confidence'.

Crucially, the students involved considered their involvement in the simulation in theoretical terms, linking the running of the simulation to the themes they encountered during the assigned reading. Another noted:

The simulation...was a great way to reinforce our understanding of how democracies operate. When divided into regions and representing our electorate on different issues, I felt like we ourselves fell prey to a lot of the usual 'traps of democracy' that we'd been

discussing. We became the aggressive, competitive, almost self-interested House of Cards politicians that we always complain about and often didn't look back and consult our group before making decisions in the 'parliament.'

A further student reflected:

The simulation for the module worked well in illustrating how some aspects of theory are easier to apply to the real world than others! Bizarre to think pressure from the masses could initiate serious constitutional change, but mobilising support helped do so during the exercise.

Of course, according to the literature, this is what we would have expected, as simulations have been found to develop students' comprehension and use of concepts (Asal and Blake 2006; Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008). However, by all accounts the debriefing sessions allowed students to reflect on the simulation and consider the ways in which their actions and choices could be explained with reference to the literature.

### **Lessons for running immersive simulations**

Acting out political problems in this way will not suit all courses, and will not satisfy all students. However, we found that the investment we made in the narrative arc of the simulation paid dividends. Following the Coney performances, we wanted to 'immerse' the participants in the back story of their particular region, and in the democratic process we had constructed for the session. The freedom allowed by the immersive structure of the session provided this to the students. Almost immediately, the participants amended the constitutional rules governing the session abolishing gender restrictions on election and establishing term limits. They also began to pursue the interests of their particular region, electing officials who expressly addressed the issues identified in the background information.

Equally, the period of reflection was an essential part of the session. Regardless of the depth of engagement students felt in the simulation, it would have been of little pedagogical value without the space to reconnect the session with the literature on representation. The sustained period of reflection allowed students (and instructors) to make sense of what they had done, and to consider the learning outcomes of the session. As the literature in the area suggests, this was in many ways the most important part of the simulation (Asal and Blake, 2006; Smith and Boyer 1996).

Of course, the diverse learning preferences of political science students mean that simulations like the one sketched above will never fully replace lecture-based classes as the primary means of teaching. However, we argue that our experiences underline the need to think carefully, and creatively, about the ways in which classes are conceived and delivered. It is a challenging experience to allow students the kind of agency required in immersive approaches to simulation, and there is no doubt that thinking about introducing theatrical techniques in class is time-consuming and complicated. However, the potential to enhance student understanding of complex theoretical problems means that the use of simulations like ours need to be seen as an important part of the toolkit used by contemporary instructors.

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